DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 427 607 HE 031 798

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TITLE Higher Education Research at the Millennium: A Study of Current State and Future Prospects. ASHE Annual Meeting Paper.

PUB DATE 1998-11-00

NOTE 36p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (23rd, Miami, FL, November 5-8, 1998).

PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Action Research; Educational Quality; Focus Groups; Futures (of Society); *Higher Education; *Postsecondary Education as a Field of Study; *Research and Development; Research Utilization; *Theory Practice Relationship; *Trend Analysis

IDENTIFIERS *ASHE Annual Meeting

ABSTRACT

This study compared the ideas of researchers with those of practitioners in higher education regarding what is considered significant and useful literature in terms of content, methodology, and format. The findings were interpreted in terms of theories of action research and the quality movement. Data were compiled using focus groups of researchers and practitioners meeting at five major national conferences and a survey completed by focus group participants and individuals who responded to a posting on the Web, for a total of 82 responses. Data analysis suggested three major themes: (1) both practitioners and researchers agreed there were few memorable pieces in the higher education literature, that more meaning was to be found outside higher education literature, and that dissemination was ineffective; (2) practitioners and researchers differed as to the content and format they found useful and in their standards for assessing quality; and (3) practitioners' and researchers' viewpoints diverged most when discussing significant issues to study, gaps in the literature, future directions, and improving the higher education literature. Possible reasons for this gap are discussed, including paradigmatic assumptions; different cultures or roles; professional field or discipline; disciplinary differences; tenure, promotion, and socialization factors; and seeing a false dichotomy between theory and practice. (Contains 31 references.) (DB)

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ASHE Proposal - Symposium

Higher Education Research at the Millennium: A Study of Current State and Future Prospects

By Adrianna J. Kezar

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held in Miami, Florida, November 5-8, 1998. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

ASHE Proposal - Symposium

Higher Education Research at the Millennium:
A Study of Current State and Future Prospects

By Adrianna J. Kezar

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Over the past twenty years, higher education scholars and practitioners have voiced concern about the direction and relevancy of higher education research. Pat Terenzini, Lewis Mayhew, Clifton Conrad, Sheila Slaughter, and George Keller -- to name a few -- have expressed dismay with the methodological monism (Keller, 1998), inward looking and parochial nature (Conrad, 1988), and disconnection from practice/policy (Terenzini, 1995), of current research. Lewis Mayhew told the audience at a 1984 ASHE meeting that 98% of the articles and books in higher education are useful only to those who write them (Keller, 1985). These are strong opinions that deserve examination.

Higher education research has changed significantly over the last century. From 1920 to the 1950's, research was minimal and heavily tied to practice, praxis reigned (Goodchild, 1991). Most faculty in higher education had a strong tie to administration or education. By the 1950's the classic dialectic of theory versus praxis had emerged. Researchers with disciplinary values entered higher education. Since the 1960's, there has been tension between the view of higher education as a professional field as opposed to a discipline. The profession has been in continuous flux, with perhaps insufficient dialogue about the issue of what constitutes appropriate research.

Based on the concerns of higher education scholars and the history of the field, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education has entered into an on-going national study on the quality and content of higher education literature. A common theme running through the critiques presented by those concerned with higher education research is that there is a gap between research and practice. They ask

whether praxis is a desirable research product. Therefore, the overarching purpose of this study was to examine whether a gap exists between researchers' and practitioners' ideas about what is considered significant and useful literature in terms of content, methodology, and format. The purpose of this paper is to present an impressionistic picture for which others (Symposium participants) will provide detail and interpretation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theories undergirded the study and were used initially to interpret the findings: 1) action research; and, 2) the quality movement. (The researchers understood that other explanations would be important to understanding this issue, but drew upon these frameworks initially to develop the problem statement, methodology, and analysis.) One explanation offered for the research relevancy gap is the assumption within traditional research that scholars can identify the problem, the methods for studying it, and the appropriate format without direction or feedback from practitioners (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lather, 1986). Action research and the quality movement challenge this traditional notion and suggest that researchers should question their practices and close the gap between what is needed and what is produced (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Action or participatory research and the quality movement share the common assumption that it is the individuals who work within colleges and universities who have access to the fundamental concerns practitioners face and the understanding of the type of material which might best be used to change practice (Argyis and Schon, 1989; Reinharz, 1992). The assumption these theories share is that science is not achieved by distancing oneself from the world. These two theories are described below in order to illuminate the problem of the gap between the literature produced and its application to practice.

In 1940, Kurt Lewin-- an advocate of action research -- argued that research needed to be more relevant to the issues and problems of everyday life and that the gulf between research and practice

should be bridged (Atkin, 1992; Whyte, 1984; Whyte, Greenwood & Lazes, 1989). Collaboration was identified as the key strategy for bridging this gap; Lewin suggested that researchers should develop a system so that collaboration with practitioners was built into the research process (Atkin, 1989). Lewin also stressed the importance of valuing practitioner understanding and using it to shape research agendas. Action and participatory research attempt to diminish the distinction between researcher and subject (Cancian & Armstead, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Whyte, Greenwood & Lazes, 1989). Applied fields of study such as social work, medicine, education, and management have been more likely to embrace alternative research approaches such as action research, since the benefit of engaging those impacted by the results of the research process has been acknowledged (Cancian & Armstead, 1990). However, even individuals in less applied fields such as anthropology and sociology have seen that engaging practitioners or those being researched can benefit the research process. There has not been similar interest in action or participatory research in higher education, except in the area of professional development of teachers or teacher education. Kember and Gow (1990) noted that in conducting an ERIC search of "action research and higher education" only 74 entries were yielded and almost all of them related to teacher preparation (1990). The few areas where action research seems to be conducted are in faculty development, curriculum development, and other disciplines in which those who are being researched have high status and can press to be involved in the research process (Kember & Gow, 1990). Research on students or staff, state level research on individual institutions, and institutional research studies on programs, often do not involve those groups referenced.

The quality movement emphasizes understanding stakeholders' needs in order to provide the best service and products. If researchers regard the reading audience of their research as stakeholders or customers, then it is important to produce research which is actually of interest to readers and helps them improve practice or address concerns. When researchers contact customers or consumers of research, practitioners become involved in the production of research. The quality movement also emphasizes that

all constituencies or groups affected by a process should be involved in that process. This often results in team approaches to work. Practitioners are often impacted by the results of research, thus, the quality principles would suggest that it is critical for this group to be involved in the research team or seen as a part of the research process (Freed, Klugman, & Fife, 1997).

Both of these movements suggest several benefits to modifying the research approach to include practitioners' perspectives. First, practitioners are more likely to use research that they have participated in creating. Second, the research itself is more likely to address the concerns of practitioners. Third, practitioners become more aware of research; their participation serves as a consciousness raising. Fourth, involving practitioners demystifies the research process and makes the results more accessible; it has the potential to open practitioners up to research to see it as legitimately meeting their concerns, thus closing any perceived gap. This process also has the potential to educate researchers by giving them valuable experiential knowledge from which they are sometimes separated.

Although these are two helpful lenses through which to view this issue, other explanations emerged from analysis of the data and are presented in the discussion section. Additional explanations will be offered within the symposium by the discussants.

METHODOLOGY

The ERIC Clearinghouse acts as the main collection and dissemination point of higher education literature. Almost all higher education literature produced is examined in the Clearinghouse. The Clearinghouse responds to information requests from researchers and practitioners on a daily basis. In playing this role, Clearinghouse staff noticed that practitioners were concerned about the relevancy and value of higher education literature. Their concerns mirrored those of the higher education scholars mentioned in the introduction. However, the evidence to support these concerns remained anecdotal. Collecting systematic information comparing the views of practitioners and researchers seemed critical

to understand this issue better. What type of research do individuals within and outside these institutions actually use and need? Is this similar to what researchers think is useful or relevant research? This study collected information in order to better understand if a gap exists between practitioners and researchers, the nature of this gap, and directions for bridging the gap.

In order to address these questions, ERIC conducted focus groups at national higher education conferences. There were three main reasons for choosing the focus group format. First, this is an action research project and creating a dialogue between practitioners and researchers is one of the primary goals. Dialogue was seen as critical to influencing the nature of the higher education literature. Second, probing individuals about what made the literature important to them was critical to understanding their opinions. Probing came from both the researchers and participants which led to an even richer discussion. In addition, the focus group format allowed individuals to build understanding and interpretation from each other. Third, this study began as a five year project with focus groups shaping a survey to be sent to a larger number of individuals. Thus the focus groups were-- in part-- a pilot study for the survey. The rich data obtained from the initial focus groups led to utilizing this approach as the primary data collection tool.

Individuals were identified from conference registration lists. They were contacted by phone or e-mail and asked if they would be willing to participate in a focus group. The questions were e-mailed to participants prior to the focus groups. Group sessions lasted approximately 1 ½ hours. The results were summarized by a notetaker and sent out to participants for review. The questions were also placed on the Clearinghouse website. Responses from individuals to the website survey were analyzed separately from the responses of the focus groups. The responses differed markedly as there was not the opportunity to discuss comments and restate opinions. The focus group data was richer and more revealing.

Questions focused on assessing impressions about the quality of higher education literature,

gaps, and future directions. Sample questions used to structure the focus groups and posted on our website were:

1) What type of literature do you find most useful to your work? Why is it useful?

2) What percentage of the literature you read is within the field of higher education? What percentage of literature do you read outside higher education? If you read a much larger percentage outside higher education, please describe why.

3) What type of formats and writing style are most useful? How are they useful?

4) What is the most memorable piece of literature you have read in the last five years? Why was it so memorable?

5) Due to the plethora of material now available, what criteria do you use to determine what literature you will read?

6) What standards do you use to critique or judge literature quality, e.g., recommendations by colleagues, review articles, personal set of standard?

7) What are the most important problems or issues that need study in higher education? Why do you think they are the most important?

8) What gaps or future directions do you perceive?

It should be noted that the phrasing of the questions varied slightly and that probing questions were often used as a follow up. Also, it is important to note that these questions do not directly reflect the assumptions of action research discussed within the theoretical framework such as whether researchers included participants in their research, how often researchers interacted with practitioners, or whether research ideas emerged from conversations with practitioners. These themes did emerged within several focus groups. At the original time of designing questions, it was decided to allow these themes to emerge; future focus groups will delve into these type of questions.

Sample

Over the past two years (1996-97 and 1997-98), focus groups were held at the Association of American Colleges and Universities, Association for the Study of Higher Education, American Educational Research Association, American Association for Higher Education, and Association for Institutional Research. Participants for the focus groups were chosen through stratified random sampling from participant lists for the major higher education conferences. Certain categories were identified as important: 1) practitioner, researcher, or combined status; 2) research approach; 3) gender and race/ethnicity, and 4) institutional type. The study examined differences by role; this was the primary sampling criteria. Practitioners were typically institutional researchers, student affairs officers, academic affairs administrators, or administrators from other areas such as alumni affairs, development, or associations. The term researcher refers almost exclusively to higher education faculty members. There were a handful of researchers from think-tanks or from other pure research settings.

Research approach was a significant category, as an underlying assumption of the study is that approach to research is an explanation for the research-practice gap. Researchers did not identify themselves as working within a certain approach, but were categorized based on their published works and comments in the focus group (theories and approaches they mentioned). Gender and race/ethnicity were not specifically examined (although emergent trends were not ignored). Gender and race/ethnicity were sampled for to obtain the perspective of diverse professionals in the field. 56% of the sample were women and 44% were men. 5% were people of color. Although we specifically sampled for people of color, it was difficult to obtain commitments from them to attend the focus groups. Institutional type or affiliation was problematic since almost all researchers were employed at large public institutions. Practitioners came from a variety of institutions, but it was not possible to compare differences based on institutional type. This may still represent an important difference, but it was not relevant within this study. We also had the focus group questions posted on our website with a participant identification

form. Several individuals filled out the survey and e-mailed it to the Clearinghouse. A total of 82 individual responses were collected from the focus group and approximately 30 more responses were collected from our web site.

Analysis

The focus group summaries typically resulted in 6-9 pages of text. These summaries were reviewed for major themes and coded by the respondent's role (researcher, practitioner, both), gender, ethnicity/race, and institutional type. It should be noted that the concept of role is complicated by the fact that some researchers were practitioners prior to their current role. However, the number of individuals who fall into this category are not so great as to discount the resultant themes. The following categories were used for initial review and correspond to the questions: 1) memorable literature; 2) quality criteria; 3) read literature within or outside higher education; 4) what they consider useful information and why; 5) important issues to study and why; 6) gaps; 7) future directions; 8) useful formats; and, 9) how to improve the literature. Words or phrases that were repeated within each category were marked. Categorical tables were developed and the comments added that matched a particular theme. If a practitioner said that higher education research is not future oriented, all similar comments were added to this theme sheet; for example, items such as "focused on issues that practitioners no longer concerned about" or "lacks vision about issues to come" were both categorized under "not future oriented." The theme name was determined by the term that was used most by individuals across focus groups. Because the focus groups were not tape recorded, the themes are based on the note taker's summarization of comments, not on exact wording. Interpretation was checked by sending summaries out to participants. As a result, few exact quotes are relied upon in this paper; general themes are reported instead. In some instances, quotes are close to verbatim. The focus group environment allowed for some change or modification of individual perspectives as people developed a consensus or

debated in the group settings. The comments that emerged at the end of long discussions I call "dialogic insights," and they will be described in the themes. Even though they may not have been mentioned as often as the theme comments, they provide insight into the collective understanding of the nature of the literature.

In terms of the sampling criteria used initially, only the respondent's role as a practitioner or researcher had an impact on the type of responses described in the themes below. Gender and race/ethnicity did not appear to have an impact on the perception of a gap in the literature. Women and people of color were just as likely as men and Caucasians to voice a belief system separated from practice. Paradigm or theoretical orientation also did not appear to have a significant impact on what was seen as memorable or significant literature, or what was seen as useful, or quality literature. Although this is a meaningful distinction to many other research questions, the research-practice gap does not appear to be associated with the paradigmatic approach of the researcher. Institutional type did appear to have an impact on practitioners' views of the higher education literature. One theme did emerge: there was a tendency for the responses from researchers at the AACU, AIR, and AAHE focus groups to be closer to practitioner's responses than for researchers at AERA or ASHE. This most likely represents a difference in culture. Researchers who attend AERA or ASHE see themselves as more closely associated with the research community; whereas, researchers who attend AAHE tend to see their role as more closely tied to practitioners.

MAJOR THEMES

Three major themes emerged in the analysis: 1) No Gap Exists; 2) The Gap Begins; and 3) Broadening the Gap. Practitioners and researchers agreed that there were few memorable pieces in the higher education literature, that they found more meaning in the literature outside higher education, and that dissemination of ideas was ineffective. Under the second theme, researchers' and practitioners'

perspectives began to differ. For example, they found different content and format useful and had different standards for assessing quality. Practitioners' and researchers' viewpoints were the most divergent when discussing significant issues to study, gaps in the literature, future directions, and improving the higher education literature.

No Gap Exists

Memorable Works are Missing. Several questions attempted to identify the importance or significance of higher education research. There was general agreement among researchers and practitioners that higher education literature is not as significant or useful as it could or should be. For example, we asked each group the most memorable piece of writing in higher education they had read in the last five years, ten years, and then without a time limit. Both researchers and practitioners had difficulty noting a memorable work they had read in higher education. Practitioners who did note a memorable piece said that it shed light on or transformed their notions about practice. In essence, the piece impacted the day-to-day lives of practitioners. Some examples will help illustrate this point. Several publications/authors were brought up in almost every focus group: Boyer's books on *Scholarship Reconsidered* or *College*, Parker Palmer's books on holistic learning and community, George Keller's work on planning and strategy, and Barr and Tagg's article in *Change* magazine. Practitioners in each group described how these works changed the ways that universities and colleges function. Boyer's work fueled and provided a language for a change on campuses that had been discussed for years. Barr and Tagg's article pushed the boundaries of what it means to learn and to teach. In discussing why the works were memorable, insightfulness and the author's knowledge of how colleges and universities operate were repeated as themes. Practitioners noted that most literature was not memorable because it did not reflect practice or did not provide insight or vision about practice. Practitioners were very interested in philosophical works that examined underlying assumptions. Works were memorable

because you could see that institutions were transformed as a result. In the words of one practitioner:

> Sadker's work on how boys and girls (and women and men) are treated differently in the classroom completely transformed the way we understand the learning process, how it was experienced differently based on gender . Practitioners had known this for years but we did not have a name for it, language to talk about it, and no empirical proof. This study provided people with the evidence and language to transform an aspect of campus environment that needed to be changed. This research completely transformed university functioning. That is the most memorable work I have read.

For researchers, describing a memorable work within the higher education literature was even more difficult. In fact, researchers often did not answer the question. The responses received can best be placed in two categories: 1) works that challenge current theoretical paradigms; and 2) works that bridge theory and practice. The majority of the researchers saw works that were wholly conceptual or theoretical as the most memorable. One researcher said, "Influential literature is that which extends my current way of thinking, lens, or paradigm. Michael Coles' book on folk psychology challenged traditional notions, and that was memorable to me." However, many researchers also mentioned that significant literature tied theory to practice. Researchers described many of the same significant works as practitioners, including Boyer's book and Barr and Tagg's article. Though there is a slightly different orientation to what is significant, with researchers leaning toward work that builds theory in isolation of the implications to practice, there is the joint agreement that work that brings practice and theory together is memorable/significant and should be more prevalent in the literature. The struggle to describe a significant work was troubling to researchers. It may be that the critical nature of the academic culture makes it more difficult to recognize a positive piece of writing.

Finding Meaning Outside of the Higher Education Literature. Practitioners and researchers were both likely to find the literature outside higher education more useful to their work. Both agreed, but for different reasons, that the higher education literature did not assist them in their day-to-day work. It is disturbing that neither found the higher education literature useful. Researchers found the higher education literature even less relevant or helpful to their work than did practitioners. The most common response was that researchers skimmed the higher education journals such as *The Review of Higher Education* and *Journal of Higher Education* and significant magazines such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Change* magazine, and *About Campus* but hardly ever found anything worth reading. The following quote epitomizes researchers' use of the literature outside of higher education: "I read outside of higher education because the literature tends to be more conceptual and abstract and useful to my work." The second most prevalent comment was that researchers were borrowing heavily from other disciplines such as management, economics, psychology, or sociology because the theoretical insights were stronger within the disciplines. Another reason for drawing on other disciplines was that some subfields were not well represented in the literature-- in particular organizational theory, teaching and learning, policy, and legal issues. The K-12 literature was often mentioned as a better source for information about subfields. Other reasons mentioned for reading outside higher education were that higher education literature is too specialized and narrow and that few pieces tied theory and practice. So one group finds the literature "untheoretical" and another group of researcers feels it is too theoretical and removed from practice. There was no identifiable trend for certain groups (constructivist, women, people of color, individuals from non-university environments) to express one belief or another. However, many researchers agreed that prescriptive literature such as Jossey-Bass books were an overly simplistic approach to tying theory to practice.

Practitioners were more likely to read works from business and management, sociology, and K-

12 literature. They found other professional literature or disciplinary literature to be philosophical, insightful, future oriented, focused on timely critical issues, and helpful to practice. Practitioners were quick to mention several non-academic publications in higher education written by non-researchers (for the most part) as the most helpful and useful to their work. *Change* magazine, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *NTLF Newsletter*, *AAHE Bulletin*, *New Directions Series*, *NY Times*, *PEW Policy Perspectives*, and *On the Horizon* were discussed most prevalently. They noted that this literature tended to have the qualities that were helpful to practitioners (philosophical, insightful, future oriented, focused on timely critical issues, and helpful to practice) and were in useful formats. The criteria and format issues will be described in greater detail next. The higher education literature was noted as foundational and a helpful reference to put a current dilemma in context. The higher education literature was felt to be descriptive and helpful in explaining current phenomenon. In the words of one practitioner:

> Most of the literature is foundational; none is particularly helpful to my professional work or day-to-day work life. It is important reference information on occasions when I have to produce a report or to contextualize a study or proposal. But on the whole, the emphasis of the literature makes it mostly irrelevant to the work I do.

Practitioners continually noted that the higher education literature was not visionary. This was the major concern and prompted the need to utilize other literature. In a dialogic moment at the end of one focus group, a practitioner noted that it appears that the higher education publishers suppress innovation: "I cannot believe that there are no researchers with innovative ideas; I have to believe that they are not published."

Dissemination Is Not as Successful as It Could Be. In dialogic moments at the end of several focus groups, the issue of dissemination emerged. Both practitioners and researchers were frustrated that ideas often did not reach the intended audience. One person, who was both a researcher and practitioner,

noted that:

> Scholars think their job is done when the publication is published. We do little to continue a dialogue about the ideas we publish. There is a need to construct dialogue related to the issues, structure conversations, and move ideas forward. It does not necessarily have to be the authors but some sort of dialogue needs to be developed for transferring important ideas. And reward structures need to support that effort.

The Gap Begins

What Is Useful Information? When practitioners were prodded about what made them read outside the field of higher education and what would make higher education literature more useful, several themes emerged and are listed in the order they were discussed most: 1) research studied irrelevant topics; timely and current issues not represented (too old); 2) too removed from the day-to-day activity of practitioners with no bridge (practitioners were expected to make the leap), (too theoretical, not sufficiently issued-focused; 3) had minimal information about best practices, how to build practice, or case scenarios; 4) lacked perspective pieces that helped reconceptualize frameworks; 4) too narrowly framed (looking at a phenomena in isolation which does not mirror reality); and, 5) lacked solutions or advice.

Practitioners perceive that academic publishing takes too long, and they feel that material is mostly irrelevant by the time it is published. Practitioners are seeking information from the World Wide Web, Listservs, and even newspapers which tend to be timely. Items 2, 3, and 4 are related in their critique. Practitioners expressed concern that the higher education literature was too descriptive, did not describe implications, and did not offer compelling details or nuances of situations. One person noted that, "too often the simple generalizations or principles offered just do not mirror the situations we face."

Also, practitioners are not adverse to theory, in fact, they wish the literature in higher education were more theoretical and bolder in perspective; what was problematic was that theory was not made relevant to practice, there was no connection.

Researchers had a very different perspective about what constitutes useful literature. The most common theme was that useful literature pushed boundaries and provided new or different perspectives or questioned commonly held assumptions. This was different from the perspective that practitioners described: that literature should provide new theoretical frameworks for understanding issues. Words such as controversial, pushing boundaries, engaging, questioning, critical, and raising questions, were mentioned again and again by researchers in describing useful literature. The emphasis was on raising questions rather than providing answers. Researchers agreed that higher education literature tended to be written in somewhat difficult or "unuseful" ways. They thought that richer descriptions were necessary, but rather than the case scenarios that practitioners desired, researchers mentioned using fiction or stories, poetry, or magazine story formats. They mentioned that advocacy, perspective-taking, or solution-oriented literature was problematic and struggled against producing this type of literature that they perceived practitioners desired. They felt that researchers should not offer advice or solutions and that practitioners wanted oversimplified analysis of issues. Several researchers noted that they were aware that the literature they were producing was not as useful to practitioners as it could be. Those who do try to develop a bridge between theory and practice find themselves lost and seeking direction. Some researchers described struggling to keep in touch with the world outside the academy; they describe themselves as separated. "I read more of the popular literature so I can keep in touch with the way people outside the academy think about things, and this helps provide a bridge."

What Are Useful formats? Researchers and practitioners differed in their notions of useful formats, mirroring the dichotomy of responses related to what is useful literature. The most common

response of practitioners was that the literature needed to be short, concise, and summative. Readability could be increased by using bullet points, accessible language, and putting the document on the Web. Accessability was brought up as a major theme within each focus group, both accessibility of the language and of the location of the document. A second criterion for a useful format was a long implications section and reference list. Literature that synthesized information was also seen as useful. Practitioners noted that if the writer has the audience in mind, the piece reads much more easily. They noted that it is apparent when the writer has not clearly identified the audience. The AIR newsletter was mentioned by many people as a model for information delivery. The newsletter is electronic, short, jargon-free, uses bullet points, is audience specific, covers a range of important topics, and can be saved on the computer for future reference. *Change* magazine was also mentioned as having a format that met most of these criteria (with the exception of the electronic accessibility). Some practitioners noted that there are also differences in learning styles. Some practitioners have an auditory learning style and since there are few tapes available on higher education topics, they will call colleagues or buy audio tapes from other fields.

Researchers thought that useful formats were those that were unpredictable, varied, lengthier, and had an emphasis on critiquing. Long theory and methodology sections were favored. Also, researchers noted that writing for multiple audiences was preferable. Theory speaks to various audiences and should be left in a more generalizable format so that various groups can see the relationship of the issues to their work. Practitioners and researchers agreed that good writing and accessibility (jargon-free language) were key to a useful format. Several researchers noted that they realized they had difficulty producing accessible works for practitioners and were working to change this: " I read the New Yorker as well as fiction in general because it helps me in academic writing. I mean it helps me to write in a less academic way."

Policy/practice documents were described by several researchers as a useful format, in particular

for impacting practice. The *Student Learning Imperative* was brought up as an example of a useful format for collaboration between researchers and practitioners. In some focus groups, practitioners and researchers debated the topic of useful formats. Several focus groups ended with a consensus that the literature needed was something between the bullet-point formats that practitioners desired and the lengthy writings that researchers conventionally produced. There was agreement that neither format was very useful. The bullet-points caused complex issues to be oversimplified, and lengthy writing was often a sign of poor, sloppy scholarship. There was acknowledgment on the part of practitioners that they need to develop strategies for reading longer pieces (for example, writing groups) because simply putting their hands up and saying, "I cannot read anything over six pages" will not help them to resolve the issues:

> We need to use the higher education literature to frame the work that we do, but to be honest there is lots of literature, and it is hard to have the time to determine what is good and worth reading. Especially since we pull in literature from business and management, sociology, public policy, as well as higher education. An institutional reading group that shares important references and resources would cut down on each individual's work. Our institution has begun what we call a collective read. Everyone is assigned different literature sources to review and summarize and to let others know about important pieces that everyone within the institution should read or know about. I think if more institutions did this, then there would be more use of the valuable resources out there.

In kind, researchers responded that they needed to be aware that practitioners did not have the luxury of time to think and reflect that researchers' schedules (at some institutions) allow.

Defining Standards and Values From the Gap: What Is Quality Literature? Given the responses to earlier questions about usefulness, significance, and direction for the higher education literature, it was not surprising that the criteria used for determining quality literature differed. Practitioners emphasized relevance to practice and the significance of the topic or issue studied as the top quality criteria. These

criteria were followed by insightfulness or new ideas, good writing, and audience-specific writing. Practitioners and researchers were in agreement that methodology was overemphasized as a criterion of quality and that writing was important. Also, the emphasis on insights or breaking new ground was discussed by both groups. In general, practitioners focused on the research product to define quality, whereas, researchers were more likely to focus on process for determining quality. Researchers mentioned peer review toward the end of the manuscript review process (for books and conference papers), better coordinated peer review, mentoring of junior faculty to the norms of the profession, and emphasis on good writing in graduate programs. Conceptual strength and logic were the criterial most commonly mentioned by researchers. Although these are different criteria, they were paired together in discussion. The significance of the topic or relevance to practice was always mentioned by researchers after practitioners brought up these issues. For the most part, they were an afterthought to researchers.

Broadening the Gap

What Are the Significant Issues? What Is Missing? What Are Future Directions for the Literature? Practitioners were quick to mention the issues that they thought were significant and needed to be studied. These mirrored responses regarding the gap in the higher education literature. Unfortunately, the majority of the issues that practitioners felt were important were not being studied. The issues mentioned included assessment of distance learning, implementation of technology, international concerns, economic issues, institutional effectiveness, performance indicators, ethics and spirituality, collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs, the articulation of K-12 into higher education, quality standards, and relationships with the community. Issues across the higher education spectrum were readily mentioned by practitioners. One practitioner noted that she was extremely interested in performance indicators, but that there was very little literature in higher education:

> I have to look to the business literature. I also find myself doing this to find literature on collaboration and assessment. I find myself in other literatures the majority of the time and then I have to translate it into the university environment. But, what other choice do I have?

There were a few gaps that were not specifically mentioned as significant issues such as the lack of studies on the different sectors in higher education, specifically private schools, community colleges, or single population serving institutions. Since higher education literature mirrors the research university's values and priorities, important issues for other sectors go unstudied. In particular, the largest sector, community colleges, tends to be mostly unstudied. The lack of research on distance learning in general was mentioned as a glaring gap in the literature. It was also noted that few people study higher education as an enterprise, from a macro systems perspective. Most research focuses on groups, programs, institutions, or state level issues; there was a concern that someone should be looking more broadly across the enterprise, connecting the smaller studies, and drawing broader implications for the enterprise. A major gap noted by both researchers and practitioner was the dearth of short, provocative, well written pieces of literature. A last gap was that the higher education literature was not visionary and simply described the current state of the academy. One practitioner asked:

> What will the university of the 21st century look like? Where are we going with distance learning? How is the enterprise changing? How might cost structures change? Is access changing? These are questions I worry about and can not find answers to.

Researchers had few responses when asked about the important issues to study or gaps in the literature. Although they actively participated in other parts of the focus group, there was mostly silence when these issues emerged. A few researchers mentioned assessment and learning outcomes as significant issues to study. In terms of gaps in the literature, they mentioned postmodern and interpretive theory as missing. When researchers mentioned gaps, they tended to think of them in terms of subfields (e.g., organizational theory or cognitive science) rather than in terms of issues (e.g., technology or learning). They might mention that there needs to be more research in the area of public policy rather

than mentioning performance indicators specifically. Also, a few researchers mentioned that the way to address future issues is to apply new theoretical frameworks. One said:

> In order to understand what the future college experience will be like, or how technology is impacting us, or different student expectations, or what it means to be a constructivist faculty member, we need postmodern theory for framing these issues and re-examining modernist assumptions that frame current thought and practice.

Researchers noted that because there was such a monolithic theoretical approach, the literature lacked the future emphasis that practitioners desired. Researchers were in agreement with practitioners that short, provocative, well written pieces of literature were missing. Literature gaps appear to be seen differently by these two groups. For practitioners it is gaps in what we know about practice issues, for researchers it is gaps in theory. The notion of important *issues* did not resonate with researchers. Perhaps they might have responded to a question about important *theories*.

How Can the Literature Be Improved? Although there is general agreement that the higher education literature lacks meaning and significance for the work of researchers or practitioners, there is not agreement on how improvement would occur. Different views of what constitutes useful information and formats and what is important to study are key to understanding the disparate responses. Researchers felt that books on how to build theory would help provide the literature with a stronger theoretical base. Different formats such as poetry, fiction, or metaphor might broaden the way we express issues. These suggestions were developed from a perspective that the literature is not significant because it is theoretically weak and methodologically narrow. The interdisciplinary nature of the higher education literature was seen as both a strength and a weakness. The lack of insights can be attributed to the lack of a theoretical core in higher education. As a result, researchers borrow heavily from other disciplines. This process is often conducted without careful review or understanding, leading to shoddy

scholarship. Yet, higher education researchers need to continue to import and relate multiple frameworks to understand higher education in complex ways.

Practitioners conceptualize improvement in very different ways. They emphasized that the lens applied to the study of higher education needs to be modified. Researchers need to understand what the issues are in practice and begin to study these issues. Practitioners also noted that the values of the research university need to be examined and re-aligned to encompass the entire enterprise. The advice and solution-oriented literature that practitioners were seeking could be met by examining the models in business literature or social work. Practitioners' suggestions to produce more visionary work and case scenarios may be addressed by some of the methodological and theoretical changes proposed by researchers. Thus, there is some agreement about the changes that might be made to produce a literature base that is significant and useful.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study clearly illustrate some gap between researchers' and practitioners' views of higher education literature. Interestingly, both groups agree that the higher education literature is not memorable, insightful, or the source of important information to do their work. Thus, there is a quality problem that needs to be addressed. Addressing this issue means understanding why researchers produce literature they do not themselves find interesting and compelling (and which they believe does not assist practitioners). There are most likely several reasons that this gap exists, and the explanations have very different implications for moving toward solutions. Six possible explanations are outlined below: 1) paradigmatic assumptions; 2) role; 3) professional field or discipline distinction; 4) disciplinary differences; 5) tenure, promotion, and socialization; 6) false dichotomy. Although they are separated for discussion, the explanations overlap and are interrelated. For example, paradigmatic assumptions and false dichotomy are related explanations. Multiple explanations might best help us to understand the

research produced. Perhaps several conditions can be interrelated into a framework that provides an overarching explanation.

Paradigmatic Assumptions

The framework that guided this study suggested that the research gap was a result of methodological approaches (postpositivism, critical theory, constructivism) to research and the assumptions of traditional research The results of the study, however, provide minimal evidence that this is a satisfactory explanation. Researchers working within more progressive paradigms (critical theory or constructivism), that are represented as having a stronger orientation to practice, exhibited the same research-practice gap. This may be a result of how these paradigms are interpreted within higher education, but this does not "appear" to be a distinction.

This explanation is also weaker because the underlying assumption that can be distinguished across paradigms is the relevance to practice. This appears to be the category that all paradigms agree on. If the research does not have bearing on practice, all paradigms assume this is problematic (Lincoln, 1995). But this is open to interpretation and nuances. For example, C. W. Mills (1959) suggested that a German orientation to research based on high theory or English empiricism orients researchers away from practice. Empiricism's emphasis on method becomes so overarching that relevance to practice becomes a minute criterion. Similarly, logical or conceptual thinking becomes pre-eminent in some disciplines and approaches. Mills does not discuss critical theory, but I would argue that it focuses on theoretical concerns at the expense of practice. Mills noted that pragmatism, which was prevalent in the United States at the turn of the century, had a heavy emphasis on practice, but that many disciplines had moved away from this orientation at the mid-part of this century. Even if the different paradigms do not represent different orientations to practice, they are often enacted in ways that tend to emphasize the unbalanced approaches that concerned Mills. Perhaps all paradigms have made the move away from

practice (or at least as they are enacted within higher education), thus the issue does not differ by paradigm, but is a dilemma across paradigms.

The findings of the study did reveal that certain approaches to research were over-represented in the literature and that practitioners found this to be problematic. An empirical approach focusing on description was the main type of literature that practitioners perceived to be produced by higher education researchers. Although they realized the importance of empirical research, practitioners hoped to find other more visionary approaches focusing on the future, case studies, and thick description. Some practitioners noted that it appeared that higher education publication avenues seem to have "gatekeepers" that prevent new or more interesting thoughts from being represented. Thus, practitioners were concerned that the hegemony of empirical research had an impact on the overall quality of the literature, and that they had to go to other disciplines and fields of study for literature that was helpful to them in practice.

Although research approach continues to be a compelling explanation (especially within other fields) and accounts for some of the reason this gap exists, the study helped us identify several other factors that appear to be contributing to this divide.

Different Cultures or Roles

Another explanation might be that researchers and practitioners come from different cultures with different habits of mind, and to some extent, each has its own language and approach to communication. The results of this study illustrated that the researchers and practitioners have different criteria for what makes literature high quality and especially for what makes literature useful. Practitioners and researchers use different language and see information in distinct ways. Researchers identified conceptual strength as the key to quality, whereas, practitioners found the significance of the topic and its relevance to practice a much more important criterion. Useful literature to practitioners is

broadly framed while it is narrowly framed for researchers; raising questions is important for researchers, while offering solutions is paramount for practitioners. Lillian Katz (1996) summarized the difference between these two cultures by saying that researchers tend to have a scientific orientation based on reflection, conceptualization, theory, skepticism, and determinacy, while practitioners have a clinical orientation based on action, pragmatism, subjectivity, faith, and indeterminancy. These different orientations serve the roles in which they need to operate.

I will elaborate on a few of these habits of mind in order to illustrate the differences. Being reflective entails considering alternative courses of action and competing explanations or theories. Having an active orientation, on the other hand, enables one to act in situations of high ambiguity or when little or no information is available. Skepticism refers to the disposition to prize doubt and to be concerned about reliability and generalizability, whereas, practitioners need to believe (have faith) in the appropriateness of the action chosen, even when there is no available information to support that action (Katz, 1996). For practitioners, indeterminacy or skepticism can be a dysfunctional trait that prevents them from enacting their role effectively. Some individuals believe that this gap leaves a role for dissemination experts--publishers, journalists, or an ERIC disseminator-- to develop a bridge between these communities.

This "role" explanation tells us that researchers are producing literature based on their own culture and its rewards. The practitioners' assumptions and habits of mind are generally not taken into account; thus, the gap exists. There were many points of agreement between practitioners and researchers. Researchers did in many cases realize that relevancy to practice and some sense of direction or determinacy were important. There were some lively debates about the need for practitioners to assess critically the assumptions undergirding practice and to be more conceptual, and for researchers to grapple more with the implications of their research. But not enough discussion took place for me to believe that there was truly a meeting of the minds or understanding. A few senior researchers expressed

their dismay that the field has lost its emphasis on practice, once a key factor in the graduate education of higher education scholars. Yet, this remains a tension in the field of higher education that should at least become more visible and be discussed.

Professional Field or Discipline

A third explanation that emerged from this study is that the distinction between education as a professional field and as a disciplinary status has not been negotiated. Higher education calls itself a field of study, but there is no clear distinction as to whether it is a professional field or a discipline. In fact, this distinction has been debated in ASHE meetings and committees for the last twenty to thirty years. The choice (or really lack of choice) has several implications for the research approach and for the literature produced. Professional fields such as business or medicine have a very strong connection to practice. A search of Medline, Sociological Abstracts and ABI Inform found that the issue of the research-practice gap is commonplace and part of the regular dialogue of these disciplines. In business, for example, the inability of strategic planning or performance appraisal theories to assist in guiding the unpredictability of these processes is actively debated and solutions are openly discussed (McInnes, M., and Carleton, W., 1982; Banks and Murphy, 1985.) There is an understanding that the purpose for their existence is to develop a cadre of practitioners and to provide research that assists them in their day-to-day work. Literature produced in medicine and business is well-regarded and regularly used. These groups also have dialogue about the research-practitioner gap on a regular basis. Within a professional field, gender may also play a role in the practice-research gap. Certain fields with a majority of female workers, including nursing and social work, tend to be even more vocal about this gap than traditionally male dominated fields such as medicine or law.

Studies have shown that certain principles and assumptions undergird successful professional education (Anderson, 1974; Stark, Lowther, and Hagerty, 1986): 1) a body of knowledge and skill exists

that can be transferred to others and that is useful and necessary to perform in a profession; 2) accumulation of this knowledge greatly enhances an individual's ability to lead successfully within the profession; 3) a body of values exists that is necessary to learn to balance the needs of various constituencies; and 4) an understanding exists of professional ethics related to administrative and academic activities that promotes an environment appropriate to higher learning. The results of this study would suggest that we are not accomplishing the goal of being a successful professional field, if indeed that is a goal.

Disciplines such as sociology or political science do not see their primary purpose as developing practitioners and do not concern themselves in any large degree with whether their research has relevance or is used by practitioners. There is a fundamental difference in the assumptions and purpose of these areas. Higher education does not have this clarity because it has never made a clear determination whether it is a professional field or a discipline. Instead, it acts as both and ultimately neither. This may contribute to the fact that practitioners are less well served by the research and researchers are unsure how much they should care. Comments from researchers illustrate this lack of clarity. During one focus group, a researcher was describing the importance of the research and literature being tied to practice. Another researcher contradicted by saying that the purpose of research was to provoke thought and build a foundation of knowledge. These types of debate were commonplace in the focus groups. How can practitioners understand what higher education research offers if the field is unsure? Individual researchers hold opinions, but a lack of consensus can present a problem to outside observers and users of the literature. This also appears to contribute to the practice-research gap. Obviously programs may differ on whether they see themselves more closely tied to the disciplines or professional fields, but some discussion about this issue would provide clarity to our constituencies. In 1991, Davis, Faith, and Murrell noted that more than 30 years of debate has not resolved the issue of whether higher education is a professional field or a discipline. This issue needs to be re-examined and

may assist the field in better meeting the defined mission. If the mission is be both a discipline and a professional field, it might help to articulate this to the major constituencies of the field.

Disciplinary Differences

Another explanation is that education is not unlike other soft social science disciplines where research cannot be offered in understandable and usable forms for practitioners. Accordingly to the Biglan classification scheme, disciplines represent unique attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. These different approaches are based on the way the discipline approaches study. For example, certain disciplines approach research in more fixed or less fixed ways or study phenomena with more or less control. The differences in approach, subject studied, and so forth, result in fields with more or less consensus and certainty of results. Consequently, some practitioners will find the results of research within certain fields of study to be more ambiguous and perhaps less relevant to their work. This has been a common criticism of educational research (Robinsen, 1998). However, the results of the focus groups do not support disciplinary differences as a viable explanation. The practitioners found that literature from other social science fields or disciplines was very relevant to their day-to-day work. Many practitioners brought up literature from business, social work, and the K-12 area. In fact, they described literature from sociology and psychology as more meaningful to practice than higher education. Although other studies might find this to be a relevant explanation, this study does not find that disciplinary differences, in terms of certain forms of knowledge being more or less accessible or useful to practitioners, was compelling.

Tenure, Promotion, and Socialization

Related to the first four explanations above, is the issue of socialization, rewards, tenure, and publications avenues. There is a significant amount of research that indicates the importance of socialization and reward structures on faculty/research behavior (Tierney and Rhoads, 1994). Few other factors have such a strong impact on shaping orientation and behavior. Given the results of this study, it appears that research that is highly conceptual, methodologically sound, descriptive, raises questions, and (to some degree) is creative, is rewarded. Researchers seem not to be socialized to, or rewarded for values such as relevance to practice, good writing, writing for an audience, the importance of the topic, being visionary, being insightful, perspective taking, being solution oriented, understanding the landscape of higher education, or producing short, concise formats for practitioners. The field of higher education might be responding to a larger academic system that rewards an orientation to academic culture and a separation from practice. This explanation returns to Riesman's observation of the academic enterprise over forty years ago -- that institutions and programs are striving, regardless of mission, to be like the elite, AAU institutions and disciplinary programs with a strong emphasis on empirical, scientific research and theory (1956). It is difficult to sort out whether this issue is tied to tenure committees within higher education programs or related to larger tenure requirements within the University. Within some higher education programs, the disciplinary associations, e,.g., ASHE, AERA, are likely to have a greater impact than in others where socialization is more closely tied to institutional influences. Given the variety of arrangements at each institution, the explanation is likely to be complex and vary to some degree by institution. However, this explanation does suggest that the culture and values of disciplinary associations may have an impact on the resultant research and literature. I hope that the discussants will speak to this issue from their own experiences. A critical question that needs to be answered is: How do other professional fields address the issue of tenure, since they are within these

same structures? Examining this issue may shed light on this explanation of the research-practice gap.

False Dichotomy

Some researchers suggest that a dichotomy between theory and practice is false. The dichotomy is rooted in certain research assumptions that marginalize or discount practice or in approaches to knowledge where law-like generalizations are developed and applied and do not hold up in practice as the theory proposed (Miller and Simrell, 1998). This explanation suggests that the culture of the academy, the reward system of tenure, socialization of faculty, disciplinary orientations, and distinction of professional field or discipline are all encompassed within a larger paradigm that discounts practice and separates research from practice. This explanation returns to the concept of paradigm and suggests that the research paradigms in higher education (as enacted in practice) have established a false dichotomy. Making this false dichotomy apparent would allow the field to reconceptualize its value system and resolve the gap.

CONCLUSION

This paper is offered in the spirit of the bridging perspective. Certainly the paper will not meet the needs of many researchers may who find it lacking in methodological strength and reliability, perhaps not critical enough or even conceptual enough. Practitioners may find that it is not decisive enough in developing an explanation or they may feel that the author should have had enough faith to draw conclusions from the experience of talking with over a hundred individuals for two years. Although it may have limitations, this paper is meant to begin a dialogue about this "apparent" gap so that the gap can be addressed or the mis-perception resolved, not in five years when the higher education community might be more sure, but now, with some faith that there is a kernel of truth in this effort and analysis.

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